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# The 2014 Shanghai Open University International Student Exchange

Experiences and Reflection of a Participant

Bert Huizing

1 September 2014

## Introduction

In April 2014 I applied for participation in the 2014 Immersion Hub of the Shanghai Open University (SOU) International Student Exchange. As a student Educational Sciences at the Open Universiteit of The Netherlands I am interested in international experiences, extending my network and discovering new horizons as a way of lifelong learning.

The result of my application was an invitation for the exchange programme. I am very grateful for this opportunity and would like to thank the Shanghai Open University for this. From 17 – 29 August 2014 I participated in the 2014 Shanghai Open University International Student Exchange in Shanghai, People's Republic of China.

The group of international students consisted of 40 people from Austria; Brazil; Germany; Hungary; Nepal; Romania; Spain, South-Africa, Thailand and The Netherlands. In this document I describe my experiences and reflections. I have done this from an educational point because of my current Master programme. Please be aware that this document contains strictly my personal views and beliefs. Topics of discussion are – firstly – the concept of Immersion. Secondly, the Chinese language and culture and – finally – my conclusions and recommendations.

## Immersion

Immersion refers in an educational context to a method of teaching a foreign language in an environment where all communication is conducted in the language to learn. A second meaning of immersion in a cultural context points to the event of plunging of a human being in a totally different cultural environment. During two weeks I was immersed in Chinese language and plunged in Chinese culture in an interesting environment: a cosmopolitan city with a population of 24.000.000: Shanghai.

## Chinese Language

We started with the basics of the Mandarin (Pinyin Hànyǔ). The teacher used the immersion method and she did that very well and consequently. However, after a few lessons she started to use (restricted) English to give the participants more support. This worked very convenient for us and enhanced our motivation to learn Mandarin.

The structure of every lesson consisted consequently of - firstly – to learn to pronounce the initials and finals, secondly to learn words (in Pinyin) and to pronounce them, and – thirdly - the final step to the words as a character was well structured. I experienced the use of Pinyin as very helpful. I also experienced that it is really hard to learn the characters and used the words in Pinyin as a preparational step.

Pronunciation was also hard for a European like me, especially the correct use of the five tones is difficult - but essential - because the tone will set the meaning. Also the learning materials were well chosen: Hànyǔ Jiǎochéng<sup>1</sup>. A very well structured textbook and an appropriate choice for beginners.

## Chinese Culture

China has an impressive history of more than 6.000 years. Chinese culture is old, compared to Western cultures. I have learned a lot about Chinese (traditional) arts like calligraphy, painting, Wushu (martial arts) and music. Also the interesting, colourful and varying cuisine of China was explained in-depthly.

However, the program could be even better with cultural aspects of the contemporary China. For example: movies and internet. How do Chinese movies look like? How is the internet used in China? Also historical and economical aspects like the development of the Chinese state after the Emperors Era and the blooming Chinese economy could enrich the program. On the moment the Chinese economy is the 2<sup>nd</sup> economy of the World, measured in nominal GDP<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/Hanyu-Jiaocheng-Chinese-Course-Textbook/dp/7561915772>

<sup>2</sup> IMF World Economic Outlook (April 2014)

Language and culture were the central focus in the programme, however, the program will increase significance with a more academic part in the programme. Being in an academic environment I would have expect to talk with Chinese students. As an experienced distance learner I would like to discuss with Chinese students about their study and experiences.

### **Conclusions**

A program of two weeks cannot include all possible subjects. So choices should be made, but from my point of view I would suggest three options to include in future programmes of the Shanghai Open University International Student Exchange :

1. Modern history of China. Specially the remarkable economic development since 1978 is an interesting part of modern Chinese history;
2. More opportunities for interaction and discussion with SOU distance learners.
3. Guest lectures given by participants, for example about language and culture of their home countries.

I recommend strongly to maintain the Chinese language lessons. I discovered learning Chinese is absolute necessary to be able to communicate with Chinese people. Furthermore I think that the lessons make sense in regard of the principle : *Language is Culture*. And last but not least: It was really fun to join the language classes.

Finally I would like to thank the Shanghai Open University again for this great opportunity, and I hope my humble remarks are probably useful for compiling the future editions of Shanghai Open University International Student Exchange.